



## Extraordinary ordinary men Biographies of Dutch post-war premiers reviewed

Marieke Oprel

VU University, Amsterdam

Cees Fasseur, *Eigen meester, niemand's knecht. Het leven van Pieter Sjoerds Gerbrandy. Minister-president van Nederland in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Balans; Amsterdam 2014).

Herman Langeveld, *De man die in de put sprong. Willem Schermerhorn 1894–1977* (Boom; Amsterdam 2014).

Hans Daalder & Jelle Gaemers, *Premier en elder statesman. Willem Drees 1886–1988. De Jaren 1948–1988* (Balans; Amsterdam 2014).

### INTRODUCTION

According to American historian Arthur Schlesinger, authors Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May in their *Thinking in Time. The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (1986), state that reading history may help in learning lessons from the past.<sup>1</sup> They argue that books are a storehouse of vicarious experience, the ready source of reference points for inventory and context, and that especially those who govern can gain proficiency by reading history. As history never repeats itself, and studying the causes and solutions to past problems that are similar or close to problems we face today does not always help us to avoid making the same missteps again, this statement about history teaching lessons is not uncontested. Opinions differ widely on whether history can indeed teach us lessons from the past. However, as Neustadt and May recommend (auto)biographies – in particular by or of politicians – as a pre-eminently valuable source, a reference to the still often used handbook *Thinking in Time* may

be the perfect introduction to this article, which reviews three biographies of former Dutch prime ministers: wartime Prime Minister Pieter Sjoerds Gerbrandy (1885–1961), the first post-war Prime Minister Willem Schermerhorn (1894–1977) and the last volume of the biography of “vader-tje” (daddy) Willem Drees (1886–1988). In this article, I will discuss the biographies of these three statesmen, all published in quick succession in 2014, as a case in point to investigate whether we can learn political or other lessons from former political leaders, and to reflect on the *status quaestionis* of political biographies as a genre.

### PORTRAITS OF PRIME MINISTERS

Appointed to coordinate the post-war administration of justice, to reform Dutch society, to restore political order and to strike a compromise between national and European policies, the common denominator between the three very different post-war prime ministers is “construction and reconstruction”. Pieter Sjoerd Gerbrandy, who had been put forward as Prime Minister by Queen Wilhelmina in September 1940 and held this position until the liberation of the Netherlands from the Nazis in May 1945, *prepared* Dutch post-war reconstruction. Gerbrandy’s successor, Willem Schermerhorn, who was Prime Minister for one year only (June 1945 until July 1946), implemented the prepared acts, *restored* political and social order and paved the way for general elections. Finally, Willem Drees, Prime Minister from 1948 until 1958, *reformed* Dutch society and constructed the Dutch welfare state.

Of the three post-war prime ministers, Gerbrandy and Drees are best known by the Dutch public. Both have become true historical icons, although each in his own way. Gerbrandy because of his militant appearance and his radio broadcasts for *Radio Oranje*, a broadcast set up by the Dutch government in exile in London, provided for by BBC transmitters. Drees because of his fatherly image, confirmed in his symbolic nickname “vader-tje” (daddy) Drees. He is praised as the most important Dutch politician after 1945 for his social reform laws, and was chosen as best post-war Prime Minister of the Netherlands in 2006 by the public broadcaster VPRO.<sup>2</sup> Willem Schermerhorn is largely unknown by the general Dutch public, because he served only one year as Prime Minister of the Netherlands.

### WILLEM DREES (1886–1988)

Considering all the laudations, and taking into account that Willem Drees lived to be almost 102 years, it comes as no surprise that his biography



Drees in front of his house at the Beeklaan in The Hague, on his way to work, 1951.

covers multiple volumes. Even though Daalder had worked with Drees for years and was familiar with his work and ideas, when Drees in 1973 suggested that Daalder should write his biography one day, it took Daalder, together with his co-author Jelle Gaemers, decades to finish the complete, five volume 2648 pages long biography. Previous volumes focused on Drees' younger days, his role during the Second World War, the decolonization of Indonesia and the Hofmans affair.<sup>3</sup> In the last volume, authors Hans Daalder and Jelle Gaemers paint a portrait of Willem Drees as Prime Minister. The central theme of the fifth and final volume of the Drees biography, titled *Premier en elder statesman. De Jaren 1948–1988* (in English: *Premier and elder statesmen. The years 1948–1988*) is the construction of the Dutch welfare state. In this volume, Daalder and Gaemers argue that for a Prime Minister Drees was 'unordinary ordinary' and 'unremarkably remarkable' (293). Drees, who had entered regional politics in 1904, and national politics in 1933, was a unwavering and very pragmatic social democrat. Although in historiography the 50s have often been considered a time of consensus and conformism, Drees had to face various complex issues, such as the post-war administration of justice, various social

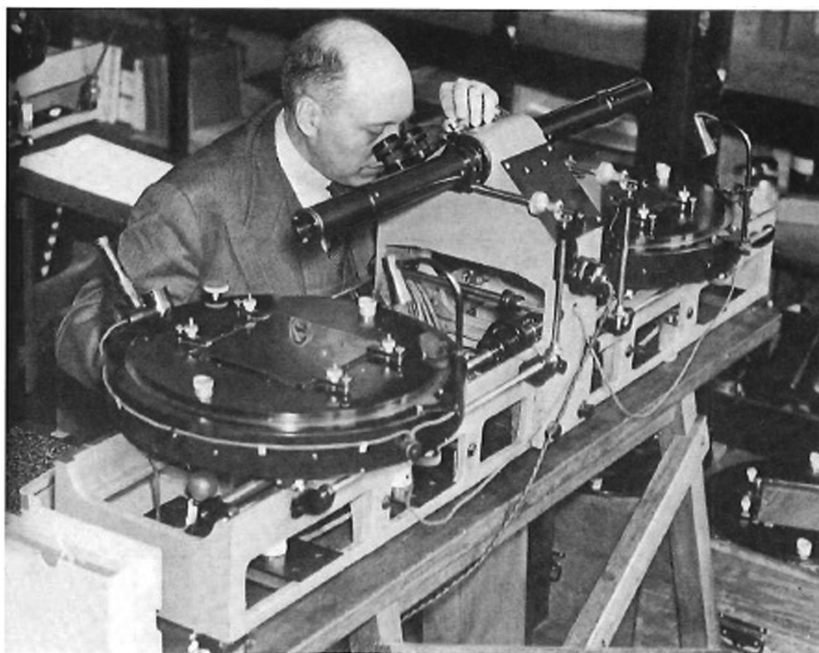
and economical problems, decolonization of the Dutch East Indies, Cold War tensions, European integration and the Korean War. However, he knew how to build bridges in the divided and pillarized Netherlands of the 50s, he accomplished structural changes and initiated several social reformative acts, of which the *Algemene Ouderdomswet* (General Old-Age Law) of 1957 is best known in the Netherlands.

Over and over again Daalder and Gaemers mention that Drees was a symbol of “Dutch simplicity” (296). His daily walk to the office, his aversion to special treatment in the cinema: the biography includes many anecdotes and stories to illustrate Drees’ ‘ordinariness’ in both his personal life and his political career. The biographers state that Drees did not create this image of simplicity himself, but did understand the significance of his image and even willingly helped maintain it by posing for photographers. They also debunk some common myths, such as the fable that Drees’ wife served only tea and simple biscuits when an American diplomat visited Drees at home to discuss American financial support for the Dutch economy.

Driven by a desire for social justice, Drees devoted his life to the realization of socio-democratic ideals. In the epilogue of the biography Daalder and Gaemers characterize Drees as a socialist, a democrat, an exceptionally competent politician and the ideal “statesman” (539–550). They state that he was known for his extraordinary intellect, his talent to oversee and contextualize and his outstanding memory, which he relied on heavily when he became visually impaired at a later age. Furthermore, Drees was a compromise-seeker by heart, for which he was respected by political opponents and sometimes criticized by his inner circle. In the final paragraph, Daalder and Gaemers conclude with the depiction of Drees as a “guard” of the state, stating that Drees embodied the ideal “statesman” (549–550). Considering that this depiction of Drees replicates the widely known and accepted picture of Drees’ persona, the authors’ remarks in their conclusion are somewhat disappointing. However, taking into account that the biographers seem completely uncritical, these last remarks come as no surprise. After decades of research and, in Daalder’s case even close personal contact with the biographee, Drees perhaps became more of a family member to the two biographers than an object of study, which has resulted in these very detailed, but unilateral series of books.

#### WILLEM SCHERMERHORN (1894–1977)

Whereas Drees is depicted as the ideal statesmen, Herman Langeveld, in his biography *De man die in de put sprong* (in English: *The man who jumped*



Schermerhorn with radial-triangulator, designed by himself, May 1938.

*into the well*) offers a completely different image of Willem Schermerhorn. Langeveld states that before 1940 nobody would have expected Schermerhorn to become a political leader. Schermerhorn, son of a Protestant farmer, studied civil engineering at the Delft University of Technology and opted for a career in science. In 1926 he was appointed Professor of Geodetics, and acquired an international reputation as a pioneer in the field of *luchtkartering* (aerial survey). Schermerhorn was an engaged, conservative liberal intellectual. With many contacts in German academia, he was well informed about Hitler's rise to power and the German National Socialist Party, and took, both in private and public, a clear stand against the national socialist ideology. In 1938 he was elected president of the movement *Eenheid door democratie* (Unity Through Democracy), which was founded in 1935 to oppose both national socialism and totalitarian communism outside parliament. The real starting point for Schermerhorn's political career, however, was his internment in the Sint-Michielsgestel camp in May 1942. Held hostage together with various other men, amongst whom were many future influential politicians, Schermerhorn became involved in discussions about how to reform

the politically and religiously pillarized Dutch society after the Second World War. During these discussions he made quiet an impression on his fellow hostages, which, together with his role as mediator in camp 'Gestel' and the fact that he joined the resistance after his release in December 1943, gave him a post-war image of a "fearless resistor". However, according to Langeveld this image is not completely justified (172).

Schermerhorn's encounter with Willem Drees during the war would prove to be important for his further political career. In May 1945, Schermerhorn, together with Drees, was appointed by Queen Wilhelmina to form a new cabinet. Schermerhorn became premier in this new post-war cabinet. This is where the title of the biography comes in. When Queen Wilhelmina asked Schermerhorn to become premier, Schermerhorn answered "Your Majesty, he who jumps into this well, is a lost man". Schermerhorn took the risk, but despite all good intentions, Schermerhorn's cabinet did not hold out for long. After just one year, the cabinet collapsed. Schermerhorn proved unable to break through the socio-political pillars that divided Dutch society. And just when the economic and social reconstruction of the post-war Dutch society began to take shape (for which Langeveld gives Schermerhorn credit in his concluding remarks), the Republic of Indonesia



Schermerhorn and Drees, Spring 1945.



declared its independence. Negotiations failed, for which Schermerhorn blamed vice premier Drees and vice versa. Schermerhorn's relation with Drees, although both were founding members of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA), would never be restored. In the new cabinet, the Beel-cabinet, Schermerhorn was left out. He became president of the *Commissie-Generaal voor Indonesie* (Commission General for Indonesia) and was commissioned to settle the Indonesian matter, in which he failed

In 1951, Schermerhorn left politics. Although still member of the Senate, he completely devoted his life to aerial survey again. In the conclusion of his biography, Langeveld states that Schermerhorn in many respect was an atypical Premier. Unlike most Dutch Prime Ministers, he had not been a minister before becoming Premier; he had been handpicked by Queen Wilhelmina, and had his own staff of advisors, men whom he had encountered during the war, who were known as 'the Schermerboys' (547–549). Earlier in the book, Langeveld already concluded that Schermerhorn was atypical because he was never afraid to delve into discussions with his opposites (308, 547–549). But the most atypical aspect of Willem Schermerhorn, which makes him unique as premier in Dutch history, was that he entered politics out of the blue, and left just as suddenly to return to his true love: science.

#### PIETER SJOERDS GERBRANDY (1885–1961)

Like Schermerhorn, Pieter Sjoerds Gerbrandy started his political career from academia. After having practised law in Leiden and Sneek, where he took a seat in the Provincial Executive of the province Friesland as deputy of the Protestant Anti Revolutionary Party (ARP), he was appointed Professor of Law at the Protestant Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam in 1930. However, if we have to believe his biographer Cees Fasseur in *Eigen meester, niemands knecht* (in English: *His own master, no one's servant*) Gerbrandy always preferred his political and additional activities, such as his presidency of the Radio Council (established in 1928), to his academic obligations. In August 1939 he therefore did not hesitate to accept the position of Minister of Justice in the cabinet de Geer-II, despite strong opposition of his ARP colleagues. Rising tensions eventually led the ARP board to withdraw Gerbrandy from the official membership list after the Dutch government went into exile in London in May 1940. However, despite his political isolation, Queen Wilhelmina decided to appoint Gerbrandy as Prime Minister in September 1940, a position he held for five years.

With his militant appearance, small, stubby and his big "walrus"-moustache, Gerbrandy was a remarkable man. Descriptions of him



Gerbrandy in conversation.

always include references to his courage – he remained calm during bombardments – and his unfaltering faith in God. As a result of his radio speeches broadcasted from London, his voice was known throughout the Netherlands and this, in combination with his appearance, made Gerbrandy become the symbol of the persistence and intransigence of the Dutch in their war against the Nazi occupation, an image that would outlive him (9, 558). It is interesting to read how Fasseur, known for his biographies of both Queen Wilhelmina and Queen Juliana, analyses the changing relation between Gerbrandy and Queen Wilhelmina. According to Fasseur, in the summer of 1940 Gerbrandy was closer to Wilhelmina than any other minister, even though he had



not been appointed Prime Minister at that time. Both Wilhelmina and Gerbrandy shared the deep conviction that the Netherlands should continue the fight against Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany until the end – in a biblical way they saw Hitler as a personification of all evil – and both of them unconditionally supported Prime Minister Winston Churchill. However, as the war years passed by, Gerbrandy had several conflicts with the Queen, especially with regard to post-war political reform. This resulted in tensions between them and, after the German capitulation and the appointment of Schermerhorn as Premier, in Wilhelmina completely ignoring Gerbrandy.

After the dissolution of his cabinet, Gerbrandy remained active in politics. He became president of *Raad voor het Rechtsherstel* (the Council for Legal Redress) and was selected a member of the House of Representatives in 1948. Worth mentioning is that Fasseur, in one of the last chapters of the biography, hints at the planning of a coup d'état in 1947, in reaction to the Linggadjadi Agreement which eventually led to the independence of Indonesia. According to Fasseur, Gerbrandy played a significant role in this mysterious coup, as interestingly enough, in a 2015 biography of Queen Wilhelmina's confidant François van 't Sant, written by Dutch journalist Sytze van der Zee and titled '*Harer Majesteits loyaalste onderdaan*' (*Her Majesty's most loyal citizen*) Fasseur's hypothesis has been confirmed. Several highly ranked Dutch officials, amongst them Gerbrandy, as well as the popular Dutch wartime RAF-pilot, Dutch spy Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema, indeed planned a coup, to take place on April 24th, 1947. The coup was meant to depose the Cabinet Beel-Drees and imprison ministers and state secretaries. Furthermore, Koos Vorrink, President of the Social-Democratic Labour Party (PvdA) was to be liquidated. However, the coup was never carried out. According to Fasseur, this had everything to do with Gerbrandy's knowledge of Queen Wilhelmina's principles. Gerbrandy must have known that the Queen never would have supported such an action, and that therefore, the coup would never be successful. Thus, even after 1945 Gerbrandy seems to have been a very influential individual in Dutch politics.

## OLD POLITICAL HISTORY

Of these three biographies, the biography of Gerbrandy offers by far the most fascinating story. Fasseur's smooth writing style and his rendering of the various characterizations of the steadfastly, stubborn Frisian and many anecdotes concerning Gerbrandy make some parts of his book read like a novel. In contrast, the biography of Willem Drees is so very

descriptive and so detailed, that the book seems more an overview of an era than the biography of a politician's life and work. Drees' glorified ordinariness makes the reader wonder whether the genre of biography is best suited to describe the *res gestae* achievement of this very influential politician. The same holds true in some respect for the biography of Schermerhorn. Langeveld's calm, collected style demonstrates systematically how Schermerhorn operated in politics. It does, however, not illustrate Schermerhorn's sometimes clumsy and powerless political performance, nor does it do justice to the difficult situations Schermerhorn had to face in his private life, such as recurring tensions in his married life. Langeveld incidentally refers to correspondence between Schermerhorn and his wife, which provides insight into what seems to have been a very complicated marriage. How private matters affected Schermerhorn's political decisions, if at all, remains under-exposed. The biographies of Drees – and to a lesser extent of Gerbrandy – have the same blind spot for the interplay between the political and the private. All the authors seem to have taken no notice of current trends in the field of 'life writing', as if all three biographers agree that a political biography should only address the political active life in which private matters seem to be of no importance.

Interestingly enough, all three biographies represent the *old political history*, focusing primarily on (male) actors, national events and institutions. The biographies are books about men written by men, chronologically ordered and written from a primarily Dutch perspective. There is almost no attention for social and cultural history. A gender perspective is missing, even though the three men were all very masculine and an excellent case in point to investigate how politics in the post-war period were primarily dominated by men. All three the biographies would have been more significant, in-depth and inventive if the authors would have used a more thematic approach and had related their studies to international actors and events. References to biographies of Churchill, Adenauer or De Gaulle for instance could have shed light on particularities of the Dutch prime ministers, or would at least have provided more insights into how leadership skills were defined in the first post-war years. Reflection on the transnational transfer of ideas, networks systems and international discussion about post-war democratic forms of government would have provided more context and new openings for discussion. Again, of the three biographies, the biography of Gerbrandy in this respect is the most inviting to read. In contrast to Langeveld and Daalder and Gaemers, Fas-seur choose to not describe every detail of Gerbrandy's life, but to select a few key topics, such as Gerbrandy and his religion, the complex relation of Gerbrandy with Queen Wilhelmina and Gerbrandy as a national icon.

This thematic approach provides insight into Gerbrandy as a private person, not just as a politician.

However, the biography of Gerbrandy does not surpass the other two biographies in all respects. Although perhaps less fascinating and a bit verbose, the biographies of Schermerhorn and Drees are the products of thorough research, based on years of extensive archival research. These biographies are a valuable contribution to historiography, with the biography of Drees an especially important reference book. Fasseur's account of Gerbrandy's life, on the other hand, is more superficial and very selective. Fasseur has used Dutch historian Loe de Jong's epic work *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (*The Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Second World War*), which comprises of twelve parts, published between 1969 and 1994, as his main reference. This is remarkable as de Jong's *magnus opus*, although in 2016 still relevant, has been severely criticized and has lost some of its actuality over the years. References to more recent studies would have strengthened the biography. Also, the omission of Gerbrandy's role in the post-war administration of justice as President of the Council for Legal Redress is remarkable. Fasseur's account of Gerbrandy's life seems sometimes a bit too glorifying, which make it a popular book for a non-academic public, but less suited for historians.

### LEARNING LESSONS?

Notwithstanding the critical remarks regarding the interpretation of the genre of the political biography by the different authors, all three biographies are a valuable contribution to Dutch historiography. They depict the lives of important politicians whose lives had not yet been described in detail, and they provide a thorough, although very nationalistic, historical overview of Dutch politics in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s. The biography of Drees in particular seems a reference work par excellence for those interested in the preparatory process of the de-pillarization and the construction of the Dutch welfare state.

With current-day Dutch politicians in general being accused of a lack of leadership capacities, the biographies of the post-war leaders also seem to hold lessons to learn from history. They provide insight into how ordinary men can turn out to be outstanding politicians in the long run as each of the biographies indicates that the perfect politician, with the perfect political skills, does not exist. Neither Gerbrandy, nor Schermerhorn nor Drees was at first sight predestined to become the influential politician they were. At first sight, Gerbrandy was too stubborn, too wayward,

Schermerhorn too adamant and politically clumsy and Drees almost too ordinary, a *primus inter pares*. If we should believe the biographies, there are no particular leadership skills that can be deduced from the lives of these politicians.

Whether the three political biographies discussed are accurate sources and resources for politicians and policy makers is another question. All three biographies are most of all valuable for a history-orientated general public. Each of the studies provides a historical overview, and considering that Gerbrandy and Drees appear to be historically immortal, political icons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a still omnipresent political legacy in Dutch politics nowadays, makes the biographies well worth reading. None of them, however, contains accurate tips or tricks for politicians or political scientists and/or historians, as was never the intention of the authors in the first place. They intended to write a life story, to provide insight to important actors in a period of political transition and to inform the general public. To show how ordinary men can become political leaders, how sudden political careers can start or end, and how these iconic premiers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were in fact just driven, committed human beings with each their own characteristics.

It is precisely the double sidedness, of ordinary men, on the one hand, of great importance for Dutch politics, on the other hand, what makes the described post-war Prime Ministers so fascinating, and their biographies in 2016 so inspiring.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marieke Oprel (1990) is a PhD candidate in Political History at the the Vrije Universiteit (VU) and the Institute for German Studies (DIA) in Amsterdam. Her research focuses on German nationals in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, who were declared enemy aliens because of their German citizenship in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Marieke studied Political and Cultural History at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, where she acquired an MPhil in History in 2014. In 2010 and 2014 she visited the Royal Netherlands Institute (KNIR) in Rome and in the summer of 2010 she was an exchange student at the *Freie Universität* of Berlin. In 2015, she received a PhD grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). Marieke is *Spreker* (representative) at the Arbeitskreis Deutsch-Niederländische Geschichte (ADNG) and a reporter for the Royal Netherlands Historical Society (KNHG).

## NOTES

- 1 Richard E. Neustadt, Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time. The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press 1986).
- 2 <http://www.npogeschiedenis.nl/nieuws/2006/januari/Willem-Drees-gekozen-tot-D-premier-na-WO-II.html>.
- 3 The Hofmans affair refers to the marital difficulties of Prince Bernhard and former Queen Juliana, attributed to the influence which faith healer Greet Hofmans had on the queen. Her political influence on Juliana, and especially her advocacy of pacifism during the Cold War period, was extremely controversial. Prince Bernhard was greatly upset by the queen's friendship with Hofmans and eventually ordered her to leave the palace, convinced she was a charlatan. However, Queen Juliana retained her friendship with Hofmans and dismissed from her circle those who did not like her. The crisis simmered on, erupting finally in 1956 with the publication of an article in *Der Spiegel* about the conflict between followers of the prince and the circle surrounding Queen Juliana. The Netherlands was in uproar. The affair had far-reaching implications. In the summer of 1956, a divorce, the abdication of the queen and a constitutional crisis were all serious considerations. To save the marriage and avoid a constitutional crisis, Prince Bernhard and Queen Juliana agreed to the appointment of a commission (which included Pieter Sjoerds Gerbrandy). As a result of the investigation, Queen Juliana was forced to break all contact with Hofmans and the most trusted members of her court were dismissed. In 2005, Queen Beatrix granted Cees Fasseur permission to read and publish from the Commission's report. In 2008, his findings were published in the appendix to his book *Juliana & Bernhard. The story of a marriage, 1936–1956*.